

PLAIN SPEAKING

Matthew 5:33-37

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The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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[A decade ago the German news magazine] *Der Spiegel* published a disturbing interview with [then] Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In it, the president suggested to the somewhat bewildered interviewer that the existence of the Holocaust should be a matter of debate and “impartial” research. As shocking and outrageous as such statements always are, what was almost more disturbing about the interview was the clever way in which the Iranian leader managed to imply that by accepting the Holocaust as historical fact, the German journalist was somehow rejecting the ideals of open debate, rational inquiry, and intellectual freedom. “We are of the opinion,” he declared, “that the truth [about the Holocaust] will be revealed all the more clearly if there is more research into it and more discussion about it.... An impartial group has to come together to investigate and to render an opinion on this very important subject.” Ahmadinejad cloaked his own anti-Semitism and Holocaust revisionism in the guise of the values that so many Westerners hold dear – impartial inquiry and the need to give equal hearing to all sides of the debate.¹

Stunning as the Iranian leader’s comments were at the time, today we might shrug our shoulders at them. For we live in a culture that has enshrined ignorance as a virtue and made of truth a relative thing. Indeed, today’s *Independent* carries a report of a recent poll in Great Britain that says more than 2.6 million Britons are Holocaust deniers.² We live in a time when misinformation and deception are favored means of countering truths we find inconvenient, which is to say that we live in a time when lies are acceptable tactics and truth is a regular casualty in public speech.

The situation in the time of Jesus apparently was not all that different, as we discern in the words about oath-taking we encountered in today’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount. In the Hebrew tradition, out of which Jesus came, oath-taking was a matter of serious consequence. In the absence of voice recorders, notary publics, and juries, God was often invoked to confirm and judge what people said, and to affirm their intention to perform duties they had promised to fulfill. Over time an elaborate system of oaths of many varieties developed, for use in a host of situations. And not-so-surprisingly, apparently there also developed an equal number of deceptive schemes for getting around the implied obligations of the oaths. Some ancient Jews devised a shifty scheme according to which certain pious-sounding oaths were not binding at all.

¹ Carter Phipps, “Whatever Happened to Truth?” *Enlighten Next* magazine, Issue 32, republished April 30, 2009, at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carter-phipps/whatever-happened-to-trut_b_191925.html.

² https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/holocaust-memorial-day-poll-uk-jews-murdered-nazi-germany-hope-not-hate-a8746741.html?fbclid=IwAR3J_K0Vz9Buz8AuUlefQqAW49Vlj5UG8zIVIoy2YBzVJR7bNCwcUhMPmmg, accessed January 27, 2019,

So, it was over against all such casual uses of oaths, over against deceit and trickery that Jesus spoke those words in the Sermon on the Mount, positing his own command of truth-telling. Old Testament law condemned *false* oaths – that is, promising in God’s name to do something and, then, not doing it. But Jesus swept away oaths of every kind.³ Since everything you say and do is said and done in the sight and presence of God, he said, let everything you say and do be honest and truthful. Jesus warned against the double-standard of truth that oaths themselves imply. We *always* live and speak in God’s presence, he said; and thus the integrity of speech and the keeping of pledges in life is always our obligation. The message then was clear, and the message now is clear. Even in our age of moral complexity, this command of Jesus stands out for its relative simplicity. Live by truth. Tell the truth. You are given power over your own words, so when you mean yes, say, “yes;” when you mean no, say, “no.” Plain speaking is the rule.

Some of you know the story of that group of high school boys, sorely afflicted with spring fever, who decided to skip school one morning. They finally wheeled into school around lunchtime, and, to their dismay, promptly ran into their algebra teacher. She asked where they’d been, and they told her that their car had had a flat tire and that it had taken them all morning to get the spare fixed and put on. Much to their relief, the teacher just smiled and said, “Okay; no problem.” But then she said, “You did miss a pop quiz this morning, however, and I’ll give you a chance to make it up rather than receive a zero if you’ll take it right after school today.” The guys weren’t thrilled, but they agreed, and so they came at the end of the school day. She spaced them apart in the room and asked them to take out a sheet of paper. Then she said, “There’s really only one question: which tire was flat?”

That teacher knew something about deception, but also a way to get at the truth. As I consider our world today, I believe one of the most discouraging signs of our times is the dishonesty and deceit that so many have come to accept in public speech and public lives, and our difficulty in finding a way to get at the truth. Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount reveal that disregard for truth is a problem far older than our own memory, but in our own day we can surely sense a wanton disregard for truth-telling and a careless pollution of language, the misuse of the gift of language to deceive and to obscure reality.⁴

Language pollution has become an acknowledged, if not accepted part of life in many spheres today, particularly, I suppose, in the political arena, where word choices often seem to have little or no basis in reality. To be fair, of course, imprecise and nebulous speech has long been a necessary tool of the political trade, to allow politicians to light-step around sensitive issues. My favorite case-in-point was a letter sent decades ago by Florida’s then seventh-district congressman Billy Matthews to a constituent who wanted to know Matthews’ stand on the issue of liquor control. Matthews wrote:

My dear friend,

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 61.

⁴ I first heard the phrase “pollution of language” with reference to the Matthew text in a sermon by John H. Leith, preached August 18, 1974 at the Trinity Presbyterian Church of Clearwater, Florida.

I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this particular time. However, I want you to know that I do not shun a controversy. On the contrary, I will take a stand on any issue at any time, regardless of how fraught with controversy it may be.

You've asked me how I feel about whiskey. Here is how I stand on this question. If, when you say whiskey, you mean the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty... then certainly I'm against it with all my power.

But, if when you say whiskey, you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good [friends] get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes... if you mean the drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold billions of dollars which are used to provide tender, loving care for little crippled children... to build highways, hospitals and schools, then certainly I'm in favor of it.

This is my stand, and I will not compromise.

Sincerely, Your Congressman.

Obviously, tact is important in every profession and every relationship, and we suffer these days from political leadership devoid of tact. But there are many times today when speech is designed not out of thoughtful consideration of others, but for the simple purpose of hiding one's deceptions. The results are anything but humorous. Think again of the political realm over the last sixty years. Remember the way the phrase "state's rights" was used for years to hide the more insidious and destructive segregationist spirit behind it? Oliver North, in his 1987 testimony in the Iran-Contra hearings, denied lying before Congress, arguing instead that he had merely provided "input radically different from the truth." And, of course, there was Bill Clinton's much-heralded, self-serving hedging on "what the meaning of 'is' is." But deception in the public sphere certainly didn't end there.

Today public speech is chock full of "alternative facts" – a euphemism for outright lies – not to mention distortions and half-truths. Whether we are speaking of politics, or discussions of scientific evidence, or business and banking, or private speech, the fact is we do not put a very high premium on truth-telling or plain speaking.

The American poet and social critic James Russell Lowell wrote a provocative anti-slavery poem in 1845 that referred to that national struggle as a titanic battle of truth over against falsehood. Entitled "The Present Crisis," the poem became the basis of the hymn "Once to Every Man and Nation." Lowell lamented that truth seemed "forever on the

scaffold, wrong forever on the throne.” But that scaffold sways the future, he said. That scaffold sways the future.⁵

That battle still goes on, even now leaving casualties of lies and deception all along the way...from the halls of power to the personal computers of cyber-bullies to the conspiracy theories of fake newscasts. Jesus said it didn’t matter what the arena was, whether sacred or secular. He said it mattered not whether the speech was common word or pious oath. All speech is uttered in the presence of God, and thus is worthy of plain speaking. Say what you mean, let your yes be yes; and mean what you say, let your no be no.

Well, let the church, at least, do so. Let us lead the way. Let us do our part. Jesus calls us to choose truth over falsehood, to a determination to work for the sanctification of life itself. Lack of integrity of language leads to the loss of integrity in every sphere. It denotes separation from God and one another. Repentance begins with the recovery of the integrity of our language. Speak the truth. That might be a place to start in learning how to *live* the truth.

Samuel Johnson said in 1750 that there were always people who confused the praise of goodness with the practice.⁶ We know the pitfalls of pretense and self-deception. The problem is how to escape the trap, how to escape falsehood to truth. I’m here to tell you today that Christ offers a way out of that trap... not just by example, but also, and more importantly, by the redemption of our lives through the shattering of the lies we have come to accept about ourselves and our world. Such redemption can be liberating, friends. Living lives of falsehood and deception is stressful. It is simpler and much more faithful simply to tell the truth. Honesty is a virtue our world so sorely needs, a virtue that is deeply at the heart of Christian life as servants of the One who spoke of himself as “the way, the *truth*, and the life.” Grace gives us the courage to start the journey. And to fortify us for the trip, Jesus binds us together in a gracious, supportive community of faith, in which truth can be taken seriously, even in the midst of a world that seems to cherish lies and deceit.

A while back I heard the story about two pastors in the Cajun-speaking region of south Louisiana. Pastor Boudreaux was the part-time pastor of the local Cajun Baptist Church, and Pastor Thibodeaux was the minister of the Covenant Church across the road. They were both standing by the road, pounding a sign into the ground that read:

Da End is Near
Turn Yo Sef ‘Roun Now
Afore It Be Too Late!

As a car sped past them, the driver leaned out his window and yelled, “You religious nuts!” Just seconds later, from just beyond the curve in the road they heard

⁵ James Russell Lowell, “The Present Crisis,” *Poems*, 1844. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/present-crisis>, accessed January 23, 1019.

⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, #28, 23 June 1750.

screeching tires, a crash, and a splash. The Reverend Boudreaux turned to Pastor Thibodeaux and asked, “Do ya tink maybe da sign should jus say, ‘Bridge Out’?”

Jesus said: say what you mean: let your yes be yes. Mean what you say: let your no be no. And he was talking about much more than a matter of clarity. He spoke of the very foundation of faithful living: Speak the truth. Let your yes be yes, and your no be no.

That Jesus! Always full of such radical ideas!